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## *Poética estrutural em movimento: Jan Mukařovský e Roman Jakobson*

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# Structural Poetics in Motion: Jan Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson

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**Annotation:** There are many perspectives that we may adopt when writing a history of literary theory and criticism and, in general, a history of literary thought. One of the approaches that I consider stimulating is the mapping of personal relationships between various literary scholars. The study deals with the relationship between two literary scholars: Jan Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson. The study analyses their transformation in the broad context of their life and work, but also in the context of the political and cultural events that took place during their lifetime. The central point of the study is an outline of the epistemological basis of Mukařovský's and Jakobson's structural poetics. Five key theoretical and methodological principles are: 1) A work of art is a *sui generis* phenomenon; 2) The principle of whole and part; 3) Movement. Literature is in constant motion; 4) Working with (literary) material; 5) A work of art is a sign. Art is a system of signs. The study can serve not only to illustrate the rises and falls of one friendship, but also the rises and falls of structuralism – one of the most prominent approaches in modern literary theory.

**Resumo:** Há muitas perspectivas que podemos adotar quando escrevemos uma história da teoria e da crítica literárias e, de um modo mais amplo, uma história do pensamento literário. Uma dessas abordagens que considero estimulante é o mapeamento das relações pessoais entre estudiosos de literatura. Este estudo trata da relação entre dois acadêmicos literários: Jan Mukařovský e Roman Jakobson. O estudo analisa as transformações no contexto amplo de suas vidas e obras, mas também no âmbito dos eventos culturais e políticos dominantes durante suas vidas. O ponto central deste estudo é prover uma síntese das bases epistemológicas das poéticas estruturais de Jakobson e de Mukařovský. Os cinco princípios-chaves teóricos e metodológicos são: 1) a obra de arte é um fenômeno *sui generis*; 2) o princípio da parte e do todo; 3) movimento. A literatura está em constante movimento; 4) trabalhar com o material (literário); 5) a obra de arte é um signo. A arte é um sistema de signos. Além disso, este estudo serve não só para ilustrar os altos e baixos de uma amizade, mas também a ascensão e o declínio do estruturalismo – uma das mais proeminentes abordagens da moderna teoria literária.

**Keywords:** Jan Mukařovský; Roman Jakobson; Central and Eastern Europe; The Prague School; Structuralism; Literary theory; Structural poetics and aesthetics

**Palavras-chave:** Jan Mukařovský; Roman Jakobson; Europa central e oriental; Escola de Praga; Estruturalismo; Teoria literária, estética e poética estruturais

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**T**he rise and fall of modern literary theory in the 20th century can be illustrated by the fate of structuralism – an approach whose origin is closely linked with the history of Central and Eastern Europe. In addition to this, the rise and fall of modern literary theory can also be fruitfully illustrated by the rise and fall of one personal friendship between well-known literary scholars – Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975) and Roman Jakobson (1896–1982).

I will try to outline these rises and falls in four points in this study.

## 1. Structuralism

It would be extremely difficult to find a scientific methodology in the history of Czech literary theory and criticism, or linguistics and aesthetics, that would be comparable with structuralism in terms of its significance and reception. In the Czech environment, the origins and development of structuralism are inseparably connected with the Prague Linguistic Circle (1926–1948; renewed after 1989), which served as a base for formulating fundamental methodological premises, notional categories, and theses concerning structural approaches to language, literature, and art in general. The importance of Prague as a key link between Russian formalism and Parisian structuralism, as well as the impact of the Prague Linguistic Circle on the formation and development of modern linguistics, poetics, and aesthetics, are generally known facts. Thanks to the scientific endeavors of Vilém Mathesius, Jan Mukařovský, Roman Osipovich Jakobson, Bohuslav Havránek, and others, the principles and the theories of the Prague School made their way into the wider cultural consciousness.

Through Roman Jakobson, who emigrated to the United States during World War II, some of the concepts of the Prague School influenced American linguistics and literary theory and criticism. In the 1950s, the centre of structuralist inquiry moved to France. The main role in this shift was played by Claude Lévi-Strauss, who, under the influence of Jakobson's phonological method, started to pay attention to the similarities between the structure of acoustic and semantic systems of language and the structure of other cultural systems (e.g. myth, kinship, and rituals). Structuralism was adopted in France as a new methodology that was universally applicable to any social and cultural phenomenon. The diverse scientific, social, and political interests of French theorists led to a considerably different conception and application of the structuralist method and its critical potential. The sociologist Lucien Goldmann, for instance, formed genetic structuralism; other scholars contemplated integrating Marxism and structuralism; still, others focused on the relationship between structuralism and hermeneutics, etc. The enormous growth in the popularity of structuralism was largely attributable to the work of French literary theorists such as Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, and Tzvetan Todorov, who used structuralism as a basis for their literary-theoretical inquiry, new poetics, and the terminology of literary theory and criticism (see Dossé 1997; 1998).

The wave of interest in structuralist literary theory peaked in the 1960s and 1970s. The wave of interest in structuralist literary theory gradually spread to both North America and the whole of Western Europe, peaking in the 1960s and 1970s (Cusset 2005). It also reached the countries of the so-called Eastern bloc: Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary, where, however, structuralism had been banned on ideological grounds since the 1950s. The 1960s mark a brief period during which structuralism was to a certain degree rehabilitated thanks to the slightly more relaxed social and political atmosphere of the decade. In Czechoslovakia, the studies of Jan Mukařovský (*Studie z estetiky* [*Studies in Aesthetics*]; Mukařovský 1966) were published for the first time; the older structuralist tradi-

tion of the Prague School was successfully taken up and further developed in a stimulating way by Czech scholars Miroslav Červenka, Milan Jankovič, Květoslav Chvatík, and others. The school of structural poetics formed in Poland (including Michał Głowiński and Janusz Sławiński), and the Nitra School developed in Slovakia (František Miko, Anton Popovič, and others). Other significant centres of semiotic and structuralist research worthy of note include those that were established in the Soviet Union at universities in Moscow and Tartu (with Yuri Michailovich Lotman and Boris Andreyevich Uspensky).

In France itself, the end of the 1960s was a time of growing criticism addressed to structuralist literary theory and criticism (in particular, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze), which led to a gradual diversion from the classical structuralism towards a new concept of structuralism. As a result of this critique, structuralism lost its dominant position and privileged status as a general scientific methodology of the humanities. In the 1980s, its position was taken over by post-structuralism (esp. deconstruction) and cultural studies.

## **2. Jan Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson**

We are not able to determine the exact day and place of the first meeting of Jan Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson. It is documented that Roman Jakobson met with the later chairman of the Prague Linguistic Circle, Vilém Mathesius, already in September 1920. The Prague Linguistic Circle was founded in October 1926. The first truly documented record of the meeting of Jan Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson is the 2nd December 1926 (TOMAN, 1995; ČERMÁK et al, 2012).

Although Roman Jakobson and Jan Mukařovský represented different types of scholars, they had many things in common: interest in modern art, versology, linguistics, poetics and aesthetics, cultural and social issues, but, above all, passionate enthusiasm for science. They started to cooperate very intensively and published a lot of common publications. In October

1929 at the First Congress of Slavic Philologists in Prague, they presented well-known *Theses of the Prague Linguistic Circle* (Theses). It was a collective work summarizing the state of linguistics and Slavic studies and outlining the main principles of the new structuralist-functionalist approach in these fields. Mukařovský and Jakobson had written a section about poetic language and poetic work.

Among other joint events in which Mukařovský and Jakobson participated and complemented each other well, we can name, for example, the ceremonial public meeting of the Prague Linguistic Circle of March 25, 1930. Its main purpose was to commemorate the important jubilee (80th birthday) of the first Czechoslovak president – Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk (MUKAŘOVSKÝ & JAKOBSON, 1931; see MUKAŘOVSKÝ, 1948b; JAKOBSON, 1981a).

Another example of a collective scholarly collaboration in which Jan Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson were involved in 1932 is a series of lectures on Literary Czech and language culture (published as a book *Spisovná čeština a jazyková kultura* (Standard Czech and Language Culture); Havránek – Weingart 1932). Their cooperation culminated in 1934 when they published in the third volume of *Československá vlastivěda* (Czechoslovak National History and Geography) their studies on old and modern Czech verse (MUKAŘOVSKÝ, 1934; JAKOBSON, 1934). In an extensive review of this publication by René Wellek we can read:

“In this publication, the authors not only presented the first history of the Czech verse from new perspectives, but they also gave us a demonstration of new literary historiography and in one section demonstrated what the new history of Czech literature might look like. [...] The revolutionary act of Mukařovský and Jakobson can be properly judged only against the background of Czech literary history until the present day.” (WELLEK, 1934, p. 437)

This Wellek's assessment of Mukařovský's and Jakobson's work confirms that a friendship arose between Mukařovský and Jakobson naturally influenced the character of their personal relationships as well as their scholarly (joint)work and

its concrete results.

In the mid-1930s, it still seemed that the trio of Czech scholars, members of the Prague Linguistic Circle, Bohuslav Havránek, Jan Mukařovský, and Roman Jakobson was essentially inseparable – in their professional activities, cooperation, as well as personal relationships. The historical and political events of 1938 and 1939 in Europe (the rises of fascism), however, placed them into completely new life situations. After the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the German fascist army, Roman Jakobson was forced to emigrate in April 1939 via Denmark, Norway, and Sweden to the United States (1941). Communication between the three of them was totally interrupted for several years.

The first greeting telegrams were sent in June 1945. However, the situation of Roman Jakobson in the United States and Mukařovský and Havránek in Czechoslovakia was radically different. While Jakobson had worked as a professor of general linguistics at Faculté des Lettres, École Libre des Hautes Études since 1941 and also as professor of Slavic languages and literature at the Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientale et Slave in New York, Mukařovský and Havránek had only limited opportunities for public appearance. It was also very difficult to carry out own scholarly work (see SLÁDEK, 2015b; 2017a).

Although Havránek and Mukařovský asked Jakobson to return and start teaching with them at the university, it did not happen in the end. Jakobson delayed his return to Czechoslovakia – he had probably some news from Erenburg that political changes would soon occur in Czechoslovakia. And that also happened in 1948, when the Czech Communist Party started to be a leading political party in Czechoslovakia.

### **3. The epistemological basis of Mukařovský's and Jakobson's structural poetics**

Despite the fact that the theoretical and methodological foundations of structural poetics of Jan Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson differ slightly in some specific aspects, they correspond in the main principles. And especially this correspondence is the highest rise of their structuralism, anyway of their structural poetics.

From the published studies, public and university lectures, but also from the joint work on the *Theses of the Prague Linguistic Circle*, it is evident that the foundation stones of structural poetics of Jan Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson were laid already in the early 1930s. Mukařovský, but in this period it surely applies also to Jakobson, based his analyses of artistic works on several key principles (see MUKAŘOVSKÝ, 1977a, 1978a; JAKOBSON 1981b, 1983).

The first one was an emphasis on the work of art as such, that is on work of art as a *sui generis* phenomenon. He adopted this principle from Russian formalists, who stressed that an analysis of artistic work should not become attached to any explanations coming from outside of the work (STEINER, 1984). This focus allowed Mukařovský and other structuralists to approach the artistic constitution of a work of art as a whole, whose parts are functionally interlinked.

This is fundamentally related to the second principle that spread in the 1910s and 1920s in the Russian milieu: the relationship between whole and part. In addition to these sources, Prague structuralism was also influenced by the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure and phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, who presented his conception of wholes and parts in his *Logische Untersuchungen II/1* (Logical Investigations II/1) in 1900 (see HUSSERL, 2001). The principle of whole and part was in the Circle always connected with the tendency to view the phenomena under examination as wholes. However, a whole was never understood as a sum or set of individual parts, but as a structure, as a whole whose individual parts are interrelated.

Hence, these parts can be interpreted only with regard to the understanding of their function and role in the whole. The



structure of the whole is thus determined by the functions of all its parts. The principle described had a fundamental impact on the conception of a poetic work, in particular, in eliminating a sharp boundary between content and form. In many of his studies, Mukařovský shows how all the elements that contribute to the formal aspect of work of art and influence or form its content. This also applies vice versa. Mukařovský elaborated the question of the relationship between whole and part in several papers in the 1940s, in which he also reacted to the holistic approach promoted by Czech scholar and biologist Jan Bělehrádek. Starting already in the late 1920s, Mukařovský's own conception of the structure and of the whole was based on the ideas of German philosopher Wilhelm Burkamp, but the most importantly on the principles of modern linguistic concepts (see MUKAŘOVSKÝ, 1977, 1978a, 1978b, 1978c, 1978d).

Another vital principle for Mukařovský was movement. He did not understand a work of art as a closed whole that originated from itself. In his opinion, every work is part of the total poetic structure that is developing.

Poetic work was created in a particular language; therefore it can be evaluated with regard to the totality of national literature, the artistic works that precede it. Mukařovský believes that a work of art does not belong to an individual, but to the society that accepted it after its publication. In line with Russian formalists, he advocated the belief that violation of tradition is the driving force of development. This was the first time he applied Hegelian dialectics that allowed him to understand development on the basis of a struggle of contradictions. It is a paradox that a work of art that is based on a violation of tradition gets closest to the tradition – by claiming it. In a nutshell: Literature is in constant motion. It is an autonomous structure that develops in accordance with its own developmental laws, but at the same time literary genres, poetic conceptions, etc. are in motion too (see MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1977a, 1977b, 1977c; WINNER 1995).

The fourth important principle that Mukařovský strictly

adhered to was permanent work with the material, omnipresent regard to the material – language or the artistic work examined. In his opinion, it is the responsibility of science to search for, describe and sort material. He could not conceive of theoretical work that would not stem from a specific material. If notions are understood as certain hypotheses, then it is naturally necessary to constantly verify them (see MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1978c).

The fifth principle was understanding a work of art as a sign and art as a system of signs (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1978c, 2016). Already in *The Theses of the Prague Linguistic Circle* from 1929 (see Theses) art was presented as a semiotic structure, in which it is the sign as such that is important, not what it designates. Understanding a work of art as sign enabled focusing on its specific nature, complex internal composition, unstable position and production of meanings in a semiotic process taking place between an artist and a recipient, but also on how it differs from other signs.

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And what exactly is the correspondence between Mukařovský and Jakobson? What is the epistemological basis of their structuralism? The answer is simple: it is a dialectics.

Jakobson and Mukařovský adopted dialectics as the epistemological basis that interconnected the above principles, but which also made it possible to understand the patterns that exist in literary structures and in the world at large. In the first half of the 1940s, especially for Mukařovský, structuralism, and dialectics began to gradually merge into one.

The notion of dialectics appears in the scholarly works of Prague structuralists in various connections. It was instrumental for them for instance in explaining specific linguistic issues, the origination and development of modern art, in interpreting the operation of literary structure, in outlining the relationship between art and society, etc. However, it is also present in works in which they accounted for their own

theoretical and methodological points of departure – points of departure of structuralism. By means of dialectics, Prague scholars started to present the notion of the structure itself as a dynamic whole, as a unity joined together by mutual contradictions of its individual parts. Dialectics was understood and interpreted as a discipline about the unity of contradictions. In their conception, it became the most fitting instrument for capturing movement and processual nature. From a dialectical perspective, the world is not seen as a set of things, but as a *set of processes*.

Basic information about dialectics was brought into the milieu of Prague Linguistic Circle by Russian and Ukrainian exiles (esp. Dmytro Chyzhevsky and Roman Jakobson). This was not only Hegelian dialectics, but in particular, the dialectics applied by Marx, Engels, and Lenin within the framework of dialectical materialism (see SLÁDEK 2017b, 2017c). The first studies in which Mukařovský invoked the principles of dialectical thinking were published in 1934. In these works, Mukařovský was negotiating his position in relation to the legacy of Russian Formalists, in particular, their notion of immanent development. He admitted that the development of language and art cannot be examined merely from the perspective of immanence, but that it is necessary to take into account also their social aspect. The fact that language and art started to be perceived by the Prague Linguistic Circle as signs, or more specifically as sign systems, prepared ground for this shift of perspective. A semiotic view of the reality at hand (language and art) required that attention be paid also to the society that uses these signs and entire sign systems. Mukařovský based his conception of dialectics on Hegel's developmental conception, which did not deal with the development of the world, but with the development of forms of thinking, with logic. He was also inspired by Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* (SLÁDEK 2017b).

Even though the first impulse to pay attention to dialectics for its ability to interpret developmental changes concerned Hegel's philosophy, Mukařovský did not accept his idealistic dialectics as such. His understanding was that it is based on

negation which results in inertness. This can be exemplified by a triad (even though this is not directly Hegel's example): thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. In Mukařovský's (but also in Jakobson's) opinion, synthesis is a dead unity without any movement. The reality, the world, is in his interpretation in constant motion. Life is change and development. The world, but for instance also thinking, is based on contradictions, and as such it cannot be static.

Applied to the relationship between whole and part: Dialectical thinking allows us to identify the mechanism of development of individual parts, as well as of the whole as such. If contradictory tendencies cease to operate between individual parts of the whole, then the whole starts to take the form of a harmonious concord, "starts to disintegrate". The whole, i.e. the structure, is (and must be) in constant motion (see MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1978b, 1978d).

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## 4. Rupture

A certain "rupture" between Jakobson and Mukařovský took place in 1948 when Jakobson remembered a package of manuscripts that he had put in custody of Mukařovský just before his departure from Czechoslovakia in April 1939. Now he asked him to return them.

Jakobson wrote several personal letters and requests to Mukařovský, but he left them without any response. Nevertheless, Jakobson was waiting impatiently for the manuscripts. When he was unable to get Mukařovský to help him directly, he tried it through Bohuslav Havránek and other friends. Havránek finally much helped him, and Jakobson received his manuscripts well. The matter was resolved, but it cast a big shadow on the relationship between Jakobson and Mukařovský for a long time. Especially in Jakobson, there remained a sense of bitterness and incomprehension of why Mukařovský did not

do anything he had asked for. We can only speculate about Mukařovský's reasons for his silence and non-response. We may consider two possible answers.

One is that the dissonance between them was a misunderstanding. The second answer is based on the fact that Mukařovský was as a rector (he was elected in spring 1948) in a completely different social, but also political, situation than before. He probably was afraid that it would have unpleasant consequences for him if anyone learned that he was cooperating with an American scholar. But it is possible that Mukařovský's reasons were completely different.

Jakobson's disgruntlement about Mukařovský was soon reflected in harsh evaluation and condemnation of his work. At the end of the 1940s, Mukařovský's papers were increasingly inclined towards Marxist-Leninist literary theory and aesthetics (MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1948c, 1949; SLÁDEK, 2015a, pp. 289–346). The common denominator of these new works and the older, purely structuralist, publications was a dialectical development perspective.

An opportunity to meet and explain the many misunderstandings and instances of communication "noise" that occurred in the post-war period was given to Jan Mukařovský and Roman Jakobson in 1957, 1968 and 1969. Jakobson visited Czechoslovakia in these years and participated in international conferences. Their encounter actually took place, as documented by preserved photographs.

What did further development of their relationship look like? Unfortunately, we do not have any other documents. However, on the basis of indirect evidence we can assume that although they never became close friends as they had been in the thirties again, they maintained their friendship – at least in the spirit of collegiality and scholarly recognition. For example, Jakobson mentions Mukařovský in his *Dialogues* with Krystyna Pomorska as one of the most inspiring scholars of the 1930s and 1940s dealing with similarities and differences between different kinds of art and semiotics of particular works of art (see JAKOBSON, 1983).

It is, of course, possible to evaluate the scholarly work of Mukařovský and Jakobson independently, regardless of the context in which this work was created. The fact is, however, that only a broad mapping of the context, its various forms and changes allows us to understand the actual meaning and scope of their work. They both made a permanent imprint in the history of Czech literary theory and criticism by their ver-sological works (see MUKAŘOVSKÝ, 1948a; JAKOBSON, 1979, 1981b). All the other works were created in a logical sequence to these studies and in the context of wide-ranging joint research in language and literature.

The last document that we can use to shed some more light on their relationship is the telegram Jakobson sent to Mukařovský for his eightieth birthday in 1971: "Best wishes to my dear friend and world-renowned scholar. Roman" (JAKOBSON, 1971). Even though Jakobson most probably did not have a high opinion of Mukařovský's public self-criticism of 1951 (MUKAŘOVSKÝ, 1951), it is obvious that he never ceased to appreciate him and his work. And there was not much difference in Mukařovský's attitude to him either.

## 5. Conclusion

These were the rises and falls of one friendship. It is evident that external circumstances and political situation have greatly influenced its appearance. The same it was with structuralism. And what is the situation now?

It is apparent from the development of literary theory that the methodological principles, essential terms, and theoretical proposals of structuralism (especially Mukařovský's and Jakobson's structural poetics) are still alive, even today. The fact that structuralism is currently acquiring a new, updated form in several fields (including literary theory and criticism) speaks in favour of this claim (see SLÁDEK, 2015b).

It follows from the development of structuralist literary theory and criticism outlined above that there is not a single

universal theory that would encompass all possible variants and approaches to literature and that would be represented by one school. Needless to say, the same applies to terminology. Despite their differences, it is evident that various structuralist conceptions within the field of literary theory and criticism share a number of common and mutually comparable features. These include a systematic (methodical) and rationally critical approach to literature and the understanding of a literary work as a specific sign whose individual components may be subject to further analysis.

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